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MEMOIR

OF

THE LIFE AND CHARACTER

OF

JOHN GRAY,

A MEMBER OF

THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS.

BY THEODORE COMPTON.

"The memory of the just is blessed."

Second Edition.

LONDON:
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His steadfast piety shall claim
A lasting favour for his name:
The sweet remembrance of the just
Shall flourish when he sleeps in dust.

His name the poor shall learn to bless,
Who oft hath succour'd their distress:
And many an humble mourner's tear
Shall grace the good man's honor'd bier.

PREFACE.

The following Memoir has been attempted at the suggestion of several friends, who considered the subject worthy of memorial.

The materials are scanty, but such as have been collected are presented to those who can appreciate the beauty of the Christian character, even when displayed but in trifles, and in unassuming obscurity.

MEMOIR OF JOHN GRAY.

VARIOUS are the talents, and diversified the vocations, which the all-wise Parent of good has been pleased to appoint for the happiness of his creatures. Nor does it appear from the testimony of revealed truth, from the evidence of history, or the elucidation of reason, that one station or calling, more than another, is peculiarly favourable for the pursuit of that pure happiness which is the certain and genuine fruit of usefulness. The divine precept. "Occupy till I come," is equally binding upon all men: and it is to the observance of this injunction that we must ever look, if we would be made instrumental in conferring real and permanent good upon our fellow-creatures: since it is not to be questioned that Divine Providence ever has provided, and ever will provide, the *means*, which, rightly employed by his free and rational agents, will be found best adapted and amply sufficient for the realization of those glorious things to which each is predestined, and which "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive."

It is not only the monarch on the throne, it is not only the great and powerful, nor is it only the pastor of the flock, the philosopher and the poet,

who possess the means of extensive and permanent usefulness; but in all the varied walks of life, from the highest to the lowest, the means of doing good are bountifully dispensed; to every man according to his several ability.

We may admire the self-sacrificing benevolence, and the ardent, yet holy, zeal of an Oberlin, the persevering philanthropy of a Howard, the munificent kindness of a Reynolds; but we must still reserve the just meed of admiration and respect for that humble Christian, who, free from the ensnaring stimulus of ambition, seeks the glory of his Maker by the faithful discharge of the duties of a lowly calling, and the good of his fellow-men by that gentle but irresistible influence which will never fail to result from a holy life. We are but too prone to be led astray by our natural affections; to derive from them our ideas of what is great and good; and, like that people of old whose minds had *waxed gross*, to see nothing in man but the perishable exterior. That unhappy people could not conceive how the "carpenter's son," whom they despised and insulted, could be that great Messiah, the "Wonderful, Counsellor, the mighty God, the everlasting Father," whose advent in the flesh their own prophets taught them was nigh at hand. But, divested of the *vanity* and sensual ideas which so often blind our eyes to the truth of Christianity, what could the human mind conceive more truly *great*, more completely the incarnate Deity than the *perfect* JESUS?

An obscure disciple of this meek and lowly

Saviour is the subject of the following pages; a character seldom selected for biography, and which must be seen in daily intercourse with men to be duly appreciated. True it is, that many a really great and extensively useful character has trodden the shady vale of obscurity, and lived and died

"Alike unknown to fortune and to fame."

Many have finished a life of usefulness, to whom the words of the poet are beautifully applicable:—

"But what! no monument, inscription, stone?
His race, his form, his name almost unknown?
Who builds a church to God and not to fame,
Will never mark the marble with his name.
Go search it there, where to be born and die,
Of rich and poor makes all the history,
Enough that Virtue filled the space between,
Proved by the ends of being, to have been."

John Gray was born at Brentford in the county of Middlesex, on the 9th of October, 1775. His father, William Gray, was a tin-plate worker and brazier; and having a family of eleven children to support on slender resources, was subjected to many cares and difficulties. His children nevertheless received the education suited to their circumstances, being brought up in the principles of Christianity as professed by the Society of Friends.

When about five years of age, John, with his eldest brother, was sent to school at Yealand, in Lancashire, where he was noticed as an amiable and innocent lad. His disposition was cheerful, his manners

meek and quiet, and his habits domestic. Husbandry and agriculture formed his favourite pursuits, and appeared peculiarly to harmonize with his unsophisticated mind. He would employ his half-holidays in assisting, as far as he was able, in his master's farm, while his schoolfellows were amusing themselves at a distance.

After leaving Yealand, John went to school at Gildersome, in Yorkshire, where he remained but a few months, and at the age of about fifteen was apprenticed to Townsend and Compton of Spitalfields, pewterers, in whose employment he spent the remainder of his life. The occupation but ill accorded with his taste for rural life, and it was with great reluctance he was persuaded to remain, chiefly at the entreaty of William M——, then an apprentice in the manufactory, who was pleased with his manners, and regarded him as a person likely to prove an agreeable companion. The friendship thus formed lasted through life, being founded in sincere and mutual esteem.

The ways of Providence are, at times, inscrutable; wonderful they are, and past finding out. But when the patient mind is afterwards permitted to behold what has been done, as it were, in darkness, how amazing is the view of Divine goodness and wisdom then unfolded; and how truly does the mind, awakened, as it seems, out of a deep slumber, exclaim with the Psalmist, "So *foolish* was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee. Nevertheless I am continually with thee; thou hast holden me by my right hand. Thou shalt guide

me with thy counsel, and afterwards receive me to glory." (Psalm lxxiii. 22. et seq.)

It was doubtless a disappointment to John Gray, as a young man, not to be permitted to follow the bent of his inclination; but who is to estimate the amount of good done by this humble individual, secretly it may be, and indirectly, but nevertheless effected by his instrumentality, in one of the poorest parishes of the metropolis? For let us remember that the soul of the most wretched wanderer through the streets is as precious and as immortal as that of the greatest prince.

When about half his term of apprenticeship had expired, John Gray was afflicted with mental derangement. The cause of his complaint is not correctly known; but it assumed so decided a form as to render it necessary to place him under restraint. He was accordingly taken to Hoxton, and thence afterwards removed to St. Luke's Hospital, where he remained a year. At the end of that time he was dismissed, according to the custom of the hospital; and being then pretty well recovered, he went to recruit his strength at his uncle's farm near Waltham Abbey. After staying there a few months he returned to complete his apprenticeship, and became in due time an able workman, being ever afterwards of a perfectly sound mind; and though he could not be considered a man of strong understanding, he grew "wise unto salvation," and would often utter a word of caution or exhortation in season and sound judgment.

His integrity, temperance, and respectful man-

ners won the esteem of his employers; whilst his cheerful piety and kindness of heart, and his unresisting patience, under every untoward circumstance, endeared him to all, and gradually obtained for him a remarkable influence over his fellow-workmen. If an oath or an evil word chanced to reach his ear, a sigh from John Gray would often produce immediate silence; and amongst all his companions, there was not an individual, old or young, who would wilfully wound his feelings.

In the life of an obscure journeyman, passing day after day, and year after year, in the same unvaried course, but few incidents occur worthy of record, and little is left to detain the pen of the biographer. In the present instance, the narrative of the *spiritual* journey is equally barren. Not but that our Christian Friend had passed through the wilderness and through the sea, and been baptized in the cloud and in the sea, and had eaten of the same spiritual meat, and drunk of the same spiritual drink, which the children of Israel formerly did, for he drank of that spiritual Rock which followed them; and that Rock was Christ. (1 Cor. x. 1—4) But no record being left of his journey, save in the unwritten excellences which shone forth in his character, it must be passed in silence.

He was a faithful servant for nearly fifty years; devoting his earnings and his leisure time to deeds of benevolence, many of which, there is reason to believe, are known only to Him who seeth in secret. (Matt. vi. 1—4)

He might often be seen passing along in his pe-

culiar gait, half running, half walking, with a basin in his hand, containing food for some poor object of his charity. Few knew whence he came, or whither he went; for as far as his own resources could reach he extended his kindness, without soliciting aid from others. At times, however, he was constrained to call upon his fellow-workmen and friends, to raise subscriptions for the more urgent claims of temporary destitution. The extreme simplicity of his mode of living enabled him not only to lay by sufficient for his own wants in time of need, but to extend pecuniary assistance to others, to an extent of which few had any idea. A cup of weak coffee (or rather milk slightly flavoured with coffee) and a slice of dry bread sufficed for his breakfast, and the same for his evening meal. At dinner he took meat and beer, having been accustomed to malt-liquor, and finding it agree with him. But he considered that if a man could not refrain from excess, the only way to amend was to abstain altogether. John did not, however, deny himself the comforts of life: he was neither extravagant nor grudging; but lived righteously, soberly, and godly in the sight of all men; always presenting a neat and respectable appearance; his clothing being good and ample, after the fashion of the seventeenth century, as handed down by the Society of Friends, of which he continued through life a consistent and exemplary member.

Before proceeding further, it will be necessary to say a few words for the information of those not connected with this Society, into whose hands this

tract may possibly fall. And, first, with respect to its *Meetings* for divine worship. It is held by FRIENDS, that "God is a spirit, and they that worship him, must worship him in spirit and in truth:"—that in this true worship of God nothing external is required, but that the spiritual bread, which nourishes the soul, is received in silence, and its Divine Giver praised and glorified in solemn stillness, without the intervention of human contrivances, in which there is always more or less of imperfection. But the blessing of a true gospel ministry has ever been reverently and gratefully appreciated; and it has pleased the Good Shepherd, in all periods of the existence of our religious Society, to raise up amongst us "able ministers of the New Testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." (2 Cor. iii. 6.) Besides the meetings on the Sabbath-day, and once in the middle of the week, for divine worship, the Friends in each district meet once a month, for the transaction of certain affairs of the Society. These are called *Monthly Meetings;* and hence, by a common figure, the individuals residing in each district are said to belong to such a *Monthly Meeting*, the whole Society being thus divided into *Monthly Meetings*. By the rules of the Society, certain *queries*, respecting the moral and religious condition of its members, are required to be answered by these meetings. There are also Quarterly and Yearly Meetings, but of these we need not speak.

Now John Gray regularly attended the meet-

ings for worship on the week-day, as well as on the Sabbath, besides many of those for general business; and in so doing he sacrificed no inconsiderable portion of his wages; for, being paid so much for the day's work of so many hours, he conscientiously deducted from the amount for the time he was absent from work: thus showing how justly he estimated the relative value of the "meat which perisheth," and of that "which endureth unto everlasting life," for which he waited on the Lord in company with his friends, and with which his strength was day by day renewed: thus, also, making his light to shine before men, as an example of the sincere love of God, and firm reliance on His protecting providence, in the faithful discharge of apprehended duty. The pecuniary sacrifice thus made, and in other virtuous pursuits, was equal to a fifth part of his whole earnings, which were by this means reduced to about twenty-five shillings per week. Yet, out of this sum, he for many years allowed *seven shillings* per week to a widowed sister, who had left the Society, and thus forfeited her claim upon its funds.—To them also John Gray contributed so liberally, that it was often thought out of proportion to his means. On one occasion, having subscribed two guineas towards the support of the Friends' School at Ackworth, it was suggested to him that a guinea would be quite as much as could be reasonably expected; but he replied, that he should feel most easy to give both. This sum was nearly the full amount of his earnings for two weeks!

The widow of an old blind workman, with whom he had formerly lodged, he employed as a washer-woman; and this brings to my recollection a little circumstance so characteristic of the man that I cannot omit to mention it.

John Gray used frequently to wear *paper gaiters*, while at work, and the reason he assigned was this—that the small pieces of metal falling from his work-bench on his stockings, fastened in them, and cut the poor woman's hands in washing them! The stiff paper formed a kind of canopy over his feet, and threw off the chips and dust. Every Saturday evening he took this poor woman a supply both of food and money.

There is a poor lad who frequents the neighbourhood of Spitalfields, and from his deplorable appearance, and the nick-name he has obtained, is the object of continual persecution from the swarms of ragged children, whom idleness, intemperance, and vice have deprived of parental controul. This poor creature was frequently relieved by our kind-hearted friend, who, one day seeing him pelted by his merciless enemies, sallied forth, and reprimanding the boys, proceeded to remonstrate with their parents, telling them how improper such cruelty was, and how great their own responsibility, in not bringing up their children in a more becoming manner. He returned from this kind mission, and with a smile on his countenance, said, "They only laughed at me,"—so little was he vexed by such disappointments: indeed, in the words of one of

his brothers,* "I never knew him moved upon any cross occurrence."

Though he gave away much in proportion to his income, yet he was not lavish, nor did he think it right to risk his own subsistence, in case of illness or old age, for the temporary relief of others. On the contrary, he laid by a portion of his earnings in the ever-available savings' bank; and at the time of his death he had accumulated a sum not far short of £200. With the exception of a small legacy of about £30, left him by a friend, the above amount was the fruit of his own industry and prudence; and, extraordinary as such instances are, we may readily comprehend how so much could be done with such small means, when we remember that John Gray never *wasted* anything. He never spent his money in spirits, tobacco, or in any other foolish or sensual indulgence; but what was not really required for his own, or others' comfort, he appears to have put into a drawer, in which was found at his decease a considerable sum in silver, probably retained for some specific object. The principal part of his savings he had invested in the funds. He has left, by will, the sum of £15 to the Friends' "Retreat" at York, for persons of unsound mind, and about £20 to the poor of the ***Monthly Meeting*** of which he was a member.

Thus John Gray appears to have hit that happy medium between two extremes, which is so rarely

* George Gray, of Brentford, who has kindly favoured me with several particulars in this account.

found. Heaven was ever uppermost in his mind, but earth was not despised. His neighbour was loved and benefited, but his own future wants were not forgotten; and while he placed his trust for daily bread, both spiritual and temporal, on the Lord's all-seeing Providence, he never neglected the *means* which that Providence has wisely ordained; but learned of the ant to gather his food in the harvest, and to provide, in the time of strength and vigour, for the claims of age and decrepitude. Thus he was enabled, on a recent occasion, when accidentally deprived for some weeks of the use of his hand, to decline the customary subscription for the sick, tendered him by his fellow-workmen. He thanked them for their kindness, but assured them he had sufficient, and they would want it themselves.

It has been said, that John Gray was a consistent member of the Society of Friends. He thought it a duty to support the testimonies handed down from our forefathers, for whose memory he had the highest respect, and to obey that which is ordained, in all things not opposed to the word of God.

It is well known that the people called Quakers have always publicly borne testimony against *war*, *slavery*, and *oaths;* and I have heard my father mention, as an instance of John Gray's remarkable conscientiousness, that he would never assist in executing government contracts for supplying the army and navy, regarding it as giving an indirect sanction to war; nor would he consent to

put his hand to any goods designed for the negroes, until satisfied that it could not, in any way, encourage slavery or the slave-trade.

He conscientiously disapproved of a hireling ministry, believing that the true ministers of Christ, who are moved of the Holy Spirit, having freely received, are bound freely to give. On one occasion, a young friend, in speaking on the subject of tithes, questioned the propriety of refusing to pay them, as is done by the Society of Friends, to which John simply replied, "Thou knowest we have a *testimony* to support." For he seldom gave his own opinion, but preferred referring to the Scriptures of truth, or to the "testimonies" of the founders of our Society, whom he believed to be true ministers of the Lord, raised up to declare His name to a blind and rebellious generation. And it must surely strike even the superficial reader of history, as a circumstance not a little extraordinary, that so pure a system of morality—not to say of spiritual Christianity, should have arisen at a time when the nominal church was in a state of the most lamentable desolation.

Perhaps nothing was more remarkable in the character of John Gray than his modesty and humility. Being once requested by the *Monthly Meeting* to accept of some appointment, he expressed the genuine feeling of his mind, when he said, in his artless manner, "I feel as a little child." On such occasions his respectful manners, his deference towards those placed in circumstances above him, and his just remembrance

of the different ranks of society, were truly exemplary, and called for attention and respect. This was especially the case when our friend felt it his duty to extend a word of remonstrance or caution to his *masters*, who did not conform so rigidly to the rules of the Society as John conscientiously believed to be required. His usual remark was, "I do not know how we can answer the *queries*, if we are aware of an exception:" an argument evincing much simplicity of heart, as well as integrity, in the discharge of what he regarded as his duty.

But though he believed it right to conform to whatever was ordained by his Society, there was none of that narrowness in the character of John Gray which would set limits to the power and goodness of God, by circumscribing His heavenly kingdom, to the exclusion of all but certain sects and doctrines. Our humble-minded friend entertained happier ideas of divine love, and could embrace, as a fellow-disciple of that Saviour who said, "If thou wilt enter into life, *keep the commandments*,"* every man, who, like himself, journeyed in sincerity of heart towards the promised land, however mistaken his religious opinions might seem; and he was far from regarding others with less cordiality, who differed from him in this respect. A young friend of his acquaintance having been absent from the meetings for several weeks, John Gray felt it his duty to visit him, fearing that he neglected attending any place of worship. On

* Matt. xix. 17.

being informed that the young man attended the service of the Established Church, his mind appeared relieved, and he simply replied, "Well, we are told to *try all things*; let us mind we *hold fast that which is* GOOD."

It is also worthy of remark, that after some of the branches of his employers' family had withdrawn from the Society of Friends, John Gray continued to pay them an occasional visit, as he had been accustomed to do, and was always as friendly and cordial as formerly, never alluding to any difference of religious sentiment. I mention this, because his conduct was so different in this respect from that but too often met with, even amongst those of more liberal education; and also because John Gray had been brought up all his life in strict conformity to the rules of the Society to which he belonged: he had mingled chiefly with that Society, and living in great seclusion, as far as external circumstances were concerned, they were calculated rather to narrow the mind. Nothing could have produced that true greatness of soul, which dwelt in so humble an exterior, but the pure spirit of Christianity, proclaiming, "Glory to God in the highest; and on earth, peace, good-will to men."

His visits were always acceptable to the several members of his masters' family, all of whom esteemed him highly, and in whom he in return felt a kind and friendly interest. He said but little, but there was an indescribable influence about the man, which, added to his meek and respectful

manners, made it impossible to help loving him, and feeling that he was no ordinary character.

He was a man of few words, and his speeches were generally the imperfect expression of considerable thought, and of a deeper wisdom than many gave him credit for. He enjoyed a *joke*, so long as it was innocent; but anything bordering upon the profane, or calculated in any way to injure or offend, he sedulously shunned and discouraged. Mindful of his own duty to God and man, he was very careful not to underrate the character of others, and to avoid tale-bearing and detraction. Whenever he heard others spoken against, he would endeavour to palliate their conduct; for he well knew, from his acquaintance with the wretched and degraded, who became, from time to time, the objects of his charity, how much the human mind is influenced, both in disposition and sentiment, by early education, and after association; and he would often say, "We must make great allowance for the way in which persons are brought up, and not think too harshly of those who have not been favoured with the advantages we enjoy, lest, in the end, we should be found no better stewards than they, though entrusted with more talents."

He did not, however, connive at evil in others, any more than in himself; and on one occasion, during his apprenticeship, having had reason to suspect that all was not right in the conduct of a workman in the manufactory, he felt it his duty to state his suspicions to his master. They proved

but too well founded; but the affair is said to have had a serious effect upon the mind of John Gray, and was probably one cause of his temporary derangement.

Thus far we have only enumerated the *virtues* of our friend; if he had any counteracting evils, it can only be said that his meekness and humility concealed them. That he was subject to the infirmities of humanity needs not to be questioned; but his irreproachable life affords satisfactory evidence, that through the infinite mercy and Almighty power of Him who was manifested to destroy the works of the devil, he had well nigh attained to that state of purification, in which, by the submission of the human will, the Lord and Saviour reigns supreme, and which is that state of perfection signified by the injunction, "Be ye therefore *perfect*, even as your heavenly Father is perfect:" and of which the Psalmist exclaims, "Mark the *perfect* man, and behold the upright; for the end of that man is peace:"—a very striking description of the state of *peace*, or rest, succeeding the conquest of the corrupt affections of our fallen nature, those tumultuous enemies of our peace.

The love of virtue is the love of God; for there is none good but He; and all the good which we can admire and love in our fellow-creatures, must be derived from this ONE great source. Thus the second commandment is like unto the first, and upon these two hang all the law and the prophets. (Matt. xxii. 37—40.)

The exercise of this highest emotion of the

human heart must greatly tend to its improvement and elevation. It cannot but lead the mind towards the source of all good; and this, I believe, was one great means of John Gray's usefulness. He was a man beloved of all. His sincerity no man could question. The purity of his purpose, his charity and kindness, none could doubt. No envious spirit dared to speak, nor bigot to think evil of him; and thus he was the means of warming many a cold and stubborn heart, which no remonstrance or verbal eloquence could move.

There is something so beautiful and so impressive in the character of a Christian, that he must be depraved indeed who cannot in some degree appreciate it. For a time its influence may not be sensibly felt; but though it be as the water dropping on the flint, it will inevitably and safely wear its way. But besides the example of a holy life, and the blessings of charity and kindness, there is an influence which every one possesses—a secret, spiritual power, which mind exerts upon mind, as matter upon matter, and which is generally signified by the "Communion of Saints," a doctrine professed by the Church of England, though it would seem to be but little understood or acknowledged. "There can be no doubt"—I quote the words of a minister in our Society—"There can be no doubt in the minds of those willing to take the apostolic expression in its plain and obvious sense, that there is, even in this world, with the spirits of all men, a secret, invisible communion, and many, I am sure, can bear

testimony to the comfort and support they have derived from this blessed fellowship."

It was probably this secret, spiritual influence, which operated, more than anything external, on the minds of those associated with John Gray; and it should be an ever-present motive to sanctification, to know that in subduing every sinful disposition, in suppressing every evil thought, we are labouring, not only for our own eternal happiness, but, in conjunction with the spirits of the just on earth, and those made perfect in heaven,—yea, with the King of Heaven himself,—in diffusing happiness and peace amongst our fellow-mortals; and, may we not add, amongst our heavenly brethren also? for "there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth."*

But the time drew nigh when, in the counsels of inscrutable wisdom, the earthly pilgrimage of our beloved friend should be terminated. On Saturday evening, the first of December, 1838, having received his wages, and distributed his customary alms, including a subscription for a poor workman, he retired to his lodging; and, seated by the fire-side, probably communing with his Maker, in gratitude for mercies during the past week, the messenger of God was sent with the message, "Steward, give up thy stewardship." Doubtless his spirit responded, "Lord, thy servant is ready." The summons was sudden—awful

* Luke, xv. 10; See Rev. xix. 10; xxii. 8 and 9; Psalm xxxiv. 7; Heb. i. 14; xii. 22. Compare Luke, xxiv. 4; John, xx. 12; Matt. xxviii. 2—5; and Mark, xvi. 5.

to those around, but to him joyous; and as he passed from the fleeting things of time and space, to the glorious realities of the spiritual world, exchanging the approaching Sabbath on earth, for an endless Sabbath in heaven, we feel assured that he heard the joyful sound re-echoed by kindred saints and angels, "Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

In the morning, as soon as the event became known, many poor creatures who had looked to him mainly for support, congregated about the humble abode of the departed, mourning the loss of their best or only friend. Numerous others who had known his virtue, with such of his fellow-workmen as resided in the neighbourhood, paid a last visit to his remains. Everywhere the name of John Gray was heard, coupled with all that is good and excellent.

On the following Sabbath-day his remains were interred in the Friends' burial-ground at Whitechapel, in the presence of a numerous circle of friends. A veil of peaceful solemnity spread over the group, and to repeat the words which were uttered upon the occasion, "There seemed, as it were, a voice from the grave, saying, 'Follow me, as I have followed Christ.'"

THE END.

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